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Special Analysis

IRAN-IRAQ:

Use of Chemical Weapons

Reprinted below are the Key Judgments of a recent Interagency Intelligence Memorandum (NI IIM88-10004C) on the Impact and Implications of Chemical Weapons Use in the Iran-Iraq War.

Chemical weapons and riot control agents have been part of the Iran-Iraq war since the early 1980s. Chemical weapons have become a regular and recurring tactic in the conflict, and their use is likely to increase. Both states apparently have assessed that selective use of chemical weapons can augment conventional arsenals, attain short-term objectives, influence certain combat situations, and significantly increase enemy casualties.

Baghdad and Tehran apparently believe that chemical weapons have been tactically effective or even decisive in a limited context, but chemical warfare has not provided a strategic alternative or advantage. As long as Iran and Iraq continue to employ chemicals primarily in a defensive role, neither nation will gain a strategic advantage based purely on the use of chemical weapons.

Iraq has employed such weapons—primarily in response to Iranian offensive actions.

The Iraqis have adopted a dry/dusty form of mustard that affects personnel rapidly and can penetrate the NATO-type semipermeable chemical suit.

Iran used chemical weapons on a very limited scale probably for testing or training.

estimates of chemical casualty rates are uncertain.

As more nations acquire a chemical capability, military and peacekeeping forces must expect the threat of either intentional or inadvertent exposure to chemical attack in any regional conflict of the future. The use of standard agents and agents in different forms creates unexpected vulnerabilities.

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The Intelligence Community believes that Third World countries perceive that successful use of chemical weapons on the battlefield and the lack of meaningful international sanctions or condemnations suggest that they can acquire a chemical weapons capability as a deterrent or military force multiplier without fear of repercussions.

Foreign assistance has been pivotal in the development and expansion of the Iranian and Iraqi chemical warfare programs. While Western export controls initially raised the cost and slowed the programs somewhat, both countries have become adept at circumventing these controls and altering the production processes. Their drive for an independent and indigenous chemical weapons production capability will make them less dependent on foreign support and less susceptible to external political pressures.

If the use of chemicals continues or increases, it would be an indication to Third World states that chemical weapons have military utility, and a worldwide chemical protocol or treaty could become more difficult to obtain.

Nations that have recently acquired a chemical capability or perceive a threat and see chemicals as combating the threat are not likely to give up willingly their new military tool—especially in areas of frequent conflict, such as the Middle East and Asia.

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